DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 173 903 EA 011 907

AUTHOR Maxwell, Graham
TITLE Problems and Prospects in the Evaluation of School-Based Educational Innovations--An Australian Experience.
PUB DATE Aug 78
NOTE 18p.; Paper presented at the Evaluation Network Annual Conference (4th, Aspen Conference Center, Australia, August 14-16, 1978)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Educational Innovation; Elementary Secondary Education; Evaluation Methods; Foreign Countries; Program Administration; *Program Evaluation; Special Programs
IDENTIFIERS Australia; Special Projects Program (Australia)

ABSTRACT

The Special Projects (Innovations) Program of the Australian Schools Commission receives less funding than other programs of the commission but has been received more enthusiastically, perhaps because it encourages and supports local initiatives. Given the small scale and local derivation of the projects funded under the program, evaluation presents several problems. Those not trained in evaluation are likely to resist it as too negative and to be discouraged from proposing projects. The expense of evaluation by trained evaluators may be disproportionate to the grants involved. Perhaps most important, evaluations tend to be seen by the funding agency as tools for accountability, although detailed accountability of this type may not be called for. Final reports on these small projects are rarely read--there are not enough funds for adequate dissemination of the information in the reports, yet the reports tend to be longer than is really necessary for fiscal accountability. Informal, formative evaluations helping the project achieve success may be more useful than the kinds of formal, summative evaluations now desired by the commission. Having evaluation experts train consultants already engaged in helping project directors may prove the most effective way to use the limited funding available for evaluation. (Author/PGD)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED173909

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH, EDUCATION & WELFARE
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION

THIS DOCUMENT HAS BEEN REPRODUCED EXACTLY AS RECEIVED FROM THE PERSON OR ORGANIZATION ORIGINATING IT. POINTS OF VIEW OR OPINIONS STATED DO NOT NECESSARILY REPRESENT OFFICIAL NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION POSITION OR POLICY

PROBLEMS AND PROSPECTS IN THE EVALUATION OF SCHOOL-BASED EDUCATIONAL INNOVATIONS - AN AUSTRALIAN EXPERIENCE

Graham Maxwell

Department of Education

University of Queensland

A paper presented to the Evaluation Network, Fourth Annual Conference, Aspen Conference Center, August 14-16, 1978.

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

G. Maxwell

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

EA 011 907

Abstract*

One of the most popular programs of the Australian Schools Commission has been the Special Projects (Innovations) Program under which grants are provided to support proposals initiated at the local school level by individuals and groups (schools, teachers, students, parents, community members and community groups) for innovatory projects in connection with primary and secondary education. Initially, no special provision was made for project evaluation. As a result, when an evaluation component was introduced into the program, it was grafted onto an already flourishing tree. Some of the problems encountered appear to originate from the stock (conflicts with the underlying principles and procedures of the program), others from the graft (conflicts within the purposes and procedures of project evaluation). Both types of problems are instructive--the former for the design of similar programs elsewhere, the latter for a clarification of the role of evaluation in such contexts. The paper analyzes these problems and presents some alternative possibilities for their resolution.

---

*From 1975 to 1977 the author was a member of the Queensland State Evaluation Subcommittee of the Special Projects (Innovations) Program of the Australian Schools Commission. This paper is a personal statement, not an official document of the Schools Commission.

BACKGROUND*

From the inception of the Australia Schools Commission in 1973, the Special Projects (Innovations) Program has enjoyed enthusiastic support across a wide range of educational and political opinion. Other programs of the Schools Commission (General Recurrent Grants Program, Capital Grants Program, Disadvantage Schools Program, Special Education Program, Services and Development Program) all involve more substantial resources but the Innovations Program has been able to capture more popular imagination, perhaps because it is the only program which encourages and supports local initiatives.

The motivation for the Innovations Program has been a belief that the quality of primary and secondary education needs improvement and that one way of bringing about change is to encourage the initiative and enterprise of those working in and for schools. Accordingly, it has sought to provide funds for innovatory projects proposed by individuals and groups at the local level. Proposals might be submitted by teachers, students, parents, community members, local parent or community organizations, youth group leaders and others.

A first requirement for funding has been that the proposed project be at least broadly related to primary and/or secondary education. A second requirement has been that the project be in some way innovative within its own context--that is, projects are expected to offer particular courses of action in meeting particular local needs but might not necessarily offer completely new educational ideas or technologies. While the question of whether a proposal is innovative is sometimes difficult to answer, the

---

*More complete information about the program can be found in the various Schools Commission Reports obtainable from the Schools Commission, Canberra, Australia.

touchstone has been whether the project offers well-considered practical procedures for satisfying identified local needs.

Of course, not all proposals could be funded even if they met these initial requirements. Therefore, in assessing a proposal for funding, some criteria have been necessary. One set of criteria concerns the likely results and benefits of the project: e.g., whether it meets a particular need; whether it offers immediate benefits to the target group(s); whether it may encourage further developments either by its systemic effects or by its example; and whether it may effect long-term changes in educational practice. A second set of criteria concerns the practical characteristics of the project: e.g., whether the project is likely to have the anticipated effects; whether it is well thought out; whether there is any local commitment and support; whether it is likely to be successfully implemented (however, high risk might be offset by high benefits). A third set of criteria concerns the aims, values and priorities of the Schools Commission itself; e.g., developing basic skills, increasing equality of opportunity; advancing community involvement in schools; increasing diversity of choice; developing recurrent education; developing new structures and relationships; advancing teacher development; and increasing cross-cultural or racial sensitivity. In general, meeting one or more of these criteria increases the liklihood of funding. However, these criteria are suggestive, not prescriptive. In the end, a subjective judgment of worth relative to other projects must be made. Clearly, large grants are subjected to more scrutiny than small grants.

An important feature of the program has been the use of a large and diverse group of part time counsellors. Many of these people hold full time appointments in schools, colleges and other spheres of education and undertake their responsibilities as counsellors for the program either on release time

or on their own time. Others may be members of parent and community groups. Most have first-hand experience with schools and with educational innovation. A deliberate attempt is made to maintain broad representation of institutions, affiliations and expertise.

Counsellors have been primarily responsible for two activities--appraisal of proposals to ensure that each proposal is complete and accurate, reflects the true intentions of the proposer, and meets the basic requirement of the Innovations Program; and assessment of proposals for ranking in a funding priorities list. (A counsellor is not involved in both appraising and assessing a particular project). To some extent, counsellors have also been involved in follow-up consultation with grantees--particularly providing support advise, evaluation consultation, and liaison. It has also been intended that some counsellors function as stimulators of educational innovation by providing encouragement to potential innovators in early stages of proposal development. The number and kind of assignments to each counsellor depends on the number and nature of applications and enquiries, his own wishes for involvement, his availability, his specialist knowledge and background, his geographic location, and other factors.

It may be helpful in gauging the scope of the Program to consider the amount of money involved. For 1977, the fourth year of the program, total program funds were approximately $A3 million.* Most of this amount was

---

*Allocations among the States and Territories are made on a per capita basis, although the quality of top-rated projects in each State or Territory is also taken into account. For small projects (less than $A12,000), these ratings are made by the State or Territory Innovations Committees. For large projects (more than $A12,000), the National Innovations Committee does the rating and selection. The proportional allocation nationally between small and large projects in 1977 was 57%--small and 43%--large. However, this proportional allocation differed from state to state (e.g., in Queensland 109 small projects were funded to a total of $A372,000 while large projects totaled only $A100,000).

allocated to new projects. A small amount (less than $A200,000) was allocated to contingencies, dissemination and communication activities, and project evaluation.

From the beginning of the Program, the funded projects have spanned every conceivable aspect of education. For example, one listing* categorized projects under the following headings: Audio-visual (general, film and TV production by students, audio-visual teaching aids); Teaching Methods and Class Organization (including open plan classrooms, team teaching, individualized learning and mini-schools); Curriculum Areas (agriculture, art/craft, business studies, drama, environmental studies, economics, foreign languages, literacy, mathematics, music, recreational activities, science, social education, social studies, vocational education and trade subjects); Remediation (normal classroom, special classes and schools); Disadvantaged Groups (migrants, aborigines, women); Teacher Support (production of teaching materials, teacher enrichment); Out-of-School Activities (camps, outdoor activities, playgrounds, excursions, work experience, after school and vacation programs, resource/activity/library centers); Community Involvement; Learning Networks.

Many of these projects operate on a small scale with quite modest objectives. A typical project would cost less than $A5,000 and quite a few less than $A1,000. Usually, funding is for a limited period, say one year, after which the project is expected to become self-supporting or seek funds elsewhere. It should be noted that the focus is primary and secondary education but the projects need not be located in schools; the focus serves merely to define the general clientele of the program.

---

*National Directory of Innovations Projects funded by the schools commission. Canberra: Schools Commission, March 1976.

When the program began in 1974, no special evaluation component was incorporated. The first guidelines on evaluation* were produced in September 1975, after the program had been running for more than twelve months and after several rounds of proposals had been funded. These guidelines were revised in 1977.** Together, these two documents have formed the basis of the experiences of evaluation within the Innovations Program on which the following considerations are based.

PROBLEMS

A. The first issue to emerge and one on which there is still a continuing debate is "Should there be any evaluation, at all?"

To those committed to the concept of evaluation, that may sound at worst like heresy, at best like foolishness. To those who have accepted a tradition of evaluation, mainly because of governmental initiatives, it may merely seem quaint. To those whose livelihood depends on evaluation, it may seem unthinkable. But to those whose practical initiatives are in question, it can be an emotional issue.

The argument is mainly about effects: evaluation may stifle innovation rather than encourage it; to subject projects and project directors to critical scrutiny may encourage a retreat to "safe" ideas, may discourage risky ventures, and may even lead to fewer proposals. Teachers and others, unused to much responsibility for identifying and solving local educational problems may need a lot of support and encouragement even to formulate a

---

*Guidelines for the Evaluation of Innovations Projects. Evaluation Paper No. 1. Canberra: Schools Commission, September 1975.

**Guidelines for Project Evaluation (Revised Guidelines). Canberra: Schools Commission, September 1977.

proposal. Evaluation might undercut the growing confidence of such people in their own capacities. Priority needs to be placed on fostering this confidence, on generating a climate within which educational innovation can occur and be sustained. Evaluation cannot help this process only hinder. . .

To some extent this argument represents a lack of sophistication in thinking about evaluation itself. Without any tradition of evaluation or without any debate about its alternative functions, characteristics, procedures and consequences, people can be expected to be cautious. In the experience of most people, evaluation has been mostly judgmental, negative and competitive. Mostly, when they have been evaluated, they have been criticized (either explicitly or implicitly). Why, then, place oneself in a situation where one's best efforts, one's best ideas, are looked at critically by an outsider who may very likely create considerable discomfort and insecurity.

But there was no chance of that anyway. Where would the resources come from to contract independent evaluators to every funded project? The large number, wide diversity and scattered locations of projects would make the cost prohibitive. For some, the cost would clearly exceed the project funding. How, then, to envisage any evaluation at all?

The compromise between those pressing for project evaluations and those defending the inviolability of the projects was an interesting one. All projects would be evaluated but evaluation would be the responsibility of the project director!

B. Identifying the project director as the project evaluator may have solved the problem of whether evaluation would occur but produced many new problems. In particular, most project directors would not be expected to have any training or expertise in evaluation. Might they not need help?

Evaluation undertaken by the project director was termed "general evaluation." In recognition that some project directors might need help in undertaking "general evaluation," it was suggested that the project director enlist the assistance of a colleague or friend interested in the project, but not involved in it, to discuss the progress of the project. This help was to be based on professional or friendly interest and no remuneration was envisaged.

It is not known what effect, if any, this suggestion has had on project directors. However, official concern about the poor quality of many "Final Reports" which are intended to incorporate the General Evaluation, suggest that the effect has been limited. In fact, it might be expected that, even if the process of discussion and investigation with the colleague was productive, without some form of training, the project director may not report much about it. In other words, an independent perspective may be insufficient, may even be irrelevant, to giving an adequate account of the progress of the project.

A second suggestion for obtaining help was to seek advice from the follow-up counsellor assigned to the project. Initially, it was not clear what form this advice might take and it is probably unlikely that much was sought or offered. In any case, it seems again like the blind leading the blind, since most counsellors would not be expected to have much expertise or experience in evaluation.

Further to this suggestion was the idea that the counsellor might be able to seek additional specialist help for the project director. However, if this was to be from outside the Schools Commission, it would be without remuneration and, therefore, probably fairly limited.

A more interesting idea was that the counsellor might serve as a liaison with other innovative teachers working on similar innovations who might like to

discuss the progress of the project. This idea ties evaluation directly to dissemination and warrants further consideration.

To return to the main issue here, though, if project directors are having difficulty in producing an adequate written account of their project, then what they may need is specific help in doing just that. This might not be difficult to provide. In fact, various proformas and check-lists could probably be devised which would cue project directors to various kinds of observations and various kinds of discussion points.

C. A further way of providing help to some project directors for project evaluation, was to be through provision of an evaluation consultant. This consultant would assist the project director in a more substantial evaluation than might otherwise be possible. The costs of these "augmented evaluations" were to be born by a special allocation of funds. As with a "general evaluation," the final evaluation report was to be incorporated into the final project report. The evaluation consultant was seen, then, as a consultant <u>to the project director</u> who was to retain control of the evaluation and be responsible for all reports. While this arrangement was obviously intended to preserve the integrity of the project and to enable evaluation to be incorporated easily into the already established pattern of administrative arrangements, it is somewhat alarming to an evaluator to discover that his evaluation must be filtered through the project director before it reaches the outside world. No doubt, in some cases, the evaluator would not want his name attached to the final report.

An alternative conception of the evaluation consultant's role has been a somewhat more independent one, involving production of an evaluation report submitted <u>both</u> to the project director for information in drawing up the final

report and to the relevant Evaluation Subcommittee of the Schools Commission for its use in evaluating the success of the Innovations Program.*

Further problems with this arrangement exist. Only a small number of "augmented evaluations" each year were envisaged. The principal constraint was the amount of money allocated. This amounted to approximately 1.5% of the total amount of Innovations grants; (e.g., for the state of Queensland, the allocation in 1976 was $8,000 and this was intended to cover all costs, including consultant fees, for between 4 and 10 augmented evaluations**). How, then, should projects be selected for augmented evaluation?

The first consideration was the potential value of the information to the educational community. However, the salience of the project, its size, and its complexity were also important. Inevitably, geographical location also counted, as did the stage of development of the project.*** In some cases it was thought desirable to choose a group of projects sharing a similar theme for the same evaluation consultant.****

Selection of projects and consultants for augmented evaluation was the responsibility in each state of the State Evaluation Subcommittee though the initiative might come from a project director, a counsellor, Schools Commission

---

*Ralph G. Straton. Augmented Evaluation: Purposes and Procedures. Canberra: Australian Schools Commission, February 1977.

**In fact, 4 augmented evaluations were conducted covering 9 projects.

***In 1976, augmented evaluations were faced with many partly or wholly completed projects.

****In Queensland in 1976 four themes were chosen: environmental education, open-area classrooms, remedial mathematics, computers in education.

personnel, or others. The project director was expected to be consulted at every stage to ensure the acceptability of the consultant and of the evaluation plan.

This arrangement places conflicting demands on the evaluation consultant. On the one hand, he is beholden to the project director; on the other hand, he is funded by the commission. Just whose agent is he? Does any independent report by the evaluation consultant violate the principle of project director control? There may be times when the evaluation consultant feels that different kinds of reports are appropriate to different audiences, so that the project director, the Commission and the educational community might be spoken to differently. This is an unresolved problem; the Commission has merely indicated that it would like to be informed when any disagreement arises between the evaluation consultant and the project director. Certainly, it seems evident that the evaluation consultant, through the State Evaluation Subcommittee, will be heard on any matter he considers important even if he cannot submit a formal evaluation report. The potential, then, for accusations of deception exist. Only by granting evaluation consultants an unambiguous independent status could this potential be removed. However, given the historical development of the Program, this appears unlikely. An alternative would be to abandon the concept of "augmented evaluation" entirely. The limited resources and the minor effects on the total program suggest that these evaluations are more a concession to those calling for more substantial evaluation than a central aspect of the Innovations Program.

D. This scheme of evaluation perpetuates confusion between evaluation and accountability. Naturally the funding body wants to know how its money has been spent. Therefore, a report from the project director detailing the major events of the project and accounting for the expenditure of funds in

terms of the initial proposal is understandably necessary. But to graft an evaluation program onto a procedure for fiscal accountability seems to ignore the special purposes of evaluation and its potentially different roles for different people. Thus, despite apparently good intentions to the contrary, in effect the evaluation scheme clearly emphasises summative evaluation addressed to the funding agency, and de-emphasises both formative evaluation addressed to the project director and summative evaluation addressed to other interested persons. Also, it almost certainly means that many interesting questions about the project are never asked because they are not perceived by the project director as relevant to the funding body.

This perhaps suggests the need for several different kinds of reports. But, for this to occur systematically, a system for encouraging, supporting and disseminating such reports would be needed. Formative evaluation, which might not need written reports, might be more easily encouraged. This requires a shift from viewing evaluations as resulting in product to one involving process; that is a shift from producing reports to facilitating events. Such a shift would move evaluation closer to the role of the counsellor and might offer a better relationship between the aims of Project Evaluation and the aims of the Innovations Program. It would be entirely consistent to mount meta-evaluations to assess the efficacy of this approach to evaluation.

PROSPECTS

Several possibilities for the future emerge from the foregoing discussion. Given conflicting ideologies, limited resources, uncertain expertise, and organizational stability, not all of the problems are solvable. But, there are probably some ways in which the program can be changed to produce a more

beneficial outcome from the evaluation component. These emergent possibilities accept the basic philosophy for evaluation already adopted by the project and represent alternatives to the present organizational procedures for operationalizing that philosophy.

While it would be possible to argue that more benefits would accrue to the program from the expenditure of a higher proportion of its budget on evaluation, in general this is probably an unacceptable proposition politically and socially. Among people who see the resources available for projects as insufficient to meet demand, the direction of significant amounts into evaluation is galling. They are, after all, sure of the rightness of their cause. We probably need to do better evaluation before it is seen generally as necessary. Otherwise, resources devoted to evaluation are seen as resources than could have funded a few more projects. The catch, as always, is that maybe we can't make it better without a certain amount more. The resources devoted to evaluation in the Innovations Program do seem unrealistically low. However, scarce resources also have the beneficial effect of "trimming the fat."

In defining priorities for a program like this, it does not seem that the highest priority should be placed on formal project evaluations. The written reports from such evaluations hardly ever see the light of day. They gather dust, unread, in a filing cabinet in some central archive. Even the final reports from project directors are hardly likely to be read by anyone in their entirety. Their evaluation component should, if it is at all comprehensive, make these reports excessively voluminous. The task of annotating and referencing this expanding file would be expensive; and the demands on the prospective reader excessive.

It might, of course, be possible to develop an information retrieval system. But to be successful, such a system would need to gain widespread use within the education system. That in itself might require persuasive salesmanship and encouragement among educators--and easy accessibility for busy people. Even then, the body of reports would need interpretation and review. This does not begin to look like a sensible mechanism for disseminating ideas among practitioners.

The conclusion to be drawn from the reasoning seems to be that a system of dissemination of innovations based on project reports is likely to be very expensive and of limited utility. If the aim of the project reports is to address the wider educational audience, then it is impractical. On the other hand, if the aim is to account to the Schools Commission for the events and expenditures of the projects, a simpler more direct report should be sufficient.

It seems sensible to redirect project evaluation efforts to bring them closer to the modes of operation and manners of thinking of the program participants. This would mean abandoning the concepts of general and augmented evaluations, which emphasize formal, summative reports, and substituting instead a two-pronged effort emphasizing an informal, formative process. The two prongs would be counselling and dissemination.

Part of the counsellor's role is already to give advice to project directors on project evaluation. With suitable training, this part of their role could be considerably expanded. The task for evaluation experts would then be, not to undertake project evaluations themselves, but to train the counsellors in their role as evaluation consultants to the project directors. The emphasis would need to be on helping the project director ask and seek

answers to pertinent questions about the progress of the project, and on using the information obtained to make appropriate adjustments to the project.

Training counsellors in this role might not be an easy task. The concept of formative evaluation would need to be established and some alternative strategies for working with project directors developed. Training would need to be efficient and, where possible, by example. This should present an interesting and rewarding challenge to evaluation specialists.

A consequence of this approach should be to make many more people aware of and sensitive to evaluation. It might indirectly lead to better accounts by project directors of their projects. And it might create a climate of receptivity to other levels of evaluation within the program. For example, assuming enough resources for both counsellor training in evaluation and also augmented evaluations of projects, then the latter may benefit from the former.

Dissemination is presumably the main reason for writing summative project reports. Yet, in this kind of program, the most effective dissemination is probably fairly informal. Much more needs to be considered about appropriate forms of dissemination. Since the aim of the program is <u>not</u> to generate replicable projects, dissemination is more appropriately aimed at raising the level of discussion about educational problems, encouraging the sharing of ideas about their solution, creating the climate for implementing these ideas, and reducing the repetition of unsuccessful proposals. Much of this can probably be done through arranging networks of people concerned about similar problems so that discussion and dialogue can occur. Again, the counsellor may be the key person in ensuring an appropriate flow of information to and from the project director and in arranging contacts and meetings between

appropriate people. Some form of coordination at the state or national level would be necessary and might function something like a "learning exchange."

This redirection of the effort of project evaluation would then allow somewhat more attention than in the past to other roles for evaluation within the program. For example, there is a need to monitor the internal operation of the program and its external effects. The really important question is probably whether the motivating assumption of the program is justified.

Some of the kinds of questions that need exploration at this level are:

1. Has there been an improvement in the quality of primary and secondary education as a result of the program?
2. Has there been a beneficial change in the attitudes of teachers and others to solving educational problems?
3. Are successful innovations projects noticed and implemented in other places (i.e., is dissemination adequate)?
4. Are successful innovations projects self-sustaining?
5. Would innovations projects be more successful if aspects of the program were changed?
6. Is funding critical for the implementation of an innovation (i.e., how many and what kinds of proposals are implemented without funding and how successful are they)?
7. How adequately do various aspects of the program function (e.g., appraisal, assessment, counselling, evaluation, dissemination)?

These are suggestive only. Many other aspects of the program, its operation and its effects, might be considered. The point is that by focusing on project evaluation, these questions have been largely ignored. Yet, they are of far-reaching significance in the determination of policies and procedures for the program. They could also be the very questions which might inform the implementation of similar schemes for supporting innovations in education elsewhere.